



COPS Fact Sheet

Community Oriented Policing Services

www.usdoj.gov/cops/

3-1-1 National Non-Emergency Number

The Challenge

On July 23, 1996, President Clinton issued a challenge to relieve the burden on the 9-1-1 emergency system experienced in many parts of the country.

A voluntary three-digit, non-emergency alternative, as user-friendly as 9-1-1, makes sense. Such a number frees up 9-1-1 lines for true emergencies, gives communities an easy way to reach local public services and enables them to work together on other important issues.

Clearly, this challenge was not issued in response to any ineffectiveness on the part of 9-1-1. In fact, the emergency system has been extraordinarily successful and saved the lives of many Americans. In some communities, however, it has become a victim of its own success.

The Response

In August 1996, the COPS Office formally requested that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reserve 3-1-1 for national non-emergency use. Very few three-digit numbers remained and none had been reserved for policing purposes.

On October 1, 1996, Baltimore became the first city to have an operational, non-emergency number. Since its implementation, the program has been a resounding success. 9-1-1 call volume is down by a third. 3-1-1 has picked up as many as 35 percent of the calls each day. As much as 90 minutes to 2 1/2 hours of discretionary time has been restored to beat officers for community policy. In addition, the reduction in 9-1-1 usage has allowed the emergency phone system to operate more efficiently and effectively.

On February 19, 1999 the COPS office announced grants to seven additional cities to develop 3-1-1 programs, along with providing Baltimore with new funds to expand its successful program. Those cities are Birmingham, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Rochester, New York, and Duke County, Mass.

San Jose

The first California 3-1-1 system launched in San Jose in November 1997. San Jose is working to meet the non-emergency needs of their citizenry and leading the way in California's effort to implement 3-1-1 statewide.

Dallas

In Dallas, Texas, 3-1-1 provides citizens with access to all city services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Now, the residents of Dallas do not even have to know which city agency they need. As long as they call 3-1-1 with a description of the problem, the operators can provide specific assistance, answer a range of inquiries and, if necessary, refer the call to the appropriate service operator. By using 3-1-1 to advance the principles of community oriented government, the City of Dallas is improving the quality of life for all its citizens.

Oklahoma State University

The first academic institution to implement 3-1-1, Oklahoma State University is preserving the effectiveness of its on-campus emergency system thereby providing a safer living and learning environment for college students, and university staff.

The Facts

Many police chiefs and sheriffs confirm that the 9-1-1 system is overloaded and that non-emergency calls represent a large part of the problem. The problem includes:

- Skyrocketing numbers of 9-1-1 calls, a national average of 268,000 per day — many communities have seen increases of 40-50 percent in 9-1-1 calls received per year;
- A demand on officers to respond to every 9-1-1 call including non-emergencies, forcing many agencies to become totally response-oriented and to eliminate proactive opportunities to practice community policing or engage in effective crime prevention and problem solving;
- Rising numbers of non-emergency calls to 9-1-1 — estimates of non-emergency calls range from over 50 percent of all 9-1-1 calls in Birmingham, Ala., to 90 percent in Arapahoe County, Colo.; and
- Increasing incidence of 9-1-1 callers put on hold or answered by a recording — in 1995 alone, in Los Angeles, 325,000 callers hung up the phone, discouraged by their inability to get immediate help.

The Benefits

The non-emergency number is not designed to undermine or replace 9-1-1; it is to shift non-emergency calls away from 9-1-1 and to preserve the availability of the emergency system for callers truly in need of immediate response.

An easing of the burden on 9-1-1 also will bring benefits to community policing. By reducing non-emergency calls to 9-1-1, officers will have more discretionary time to conduct other public safety business. Improved community policing will mean increased problem solving and more personal contact between police and the community. These benefits will reduce non-emergency calls to 9-1-1 even further and, at the same time, allow police to provide more effective law enforcement services.

For more information, please call the U.S. Department of Justice Response Center at 1-800-421-6770. Or, visit our website at www.usdoj.gov/cops/